

IN LOVE WITH THE LITHOSPHERE



Front cover left to right: Carbon drawings detail /
Installation view. *Image credits: Geoff Wilson / Peter Hope.*
This page: Carbon drawings detail. *Image credit: Geoff Wilson.*



Type of output:
exhibition

by
Rona Lee

‘reworking topographic
imagery to formulate
imaginary geologies
in order to reflect on
social constructions of
nature and envisage new
configurations of
human and non-human.’

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SUMMARY

In Love with the Lithosphere (ILWTL) was a body of thematically inter-related artworks: mixed media assemblages, video works and drawings on carbon paper. These mobilised Lee's extensive personal collection of mid-century scenic postcards and travel books activating this historical material as means of reflecting on contemporary eco-philosophies and discourses.

The wider sweep of thought and practice catalysed by scientific analyses of anthropogenically generated climate change - in particular Timothy Morton's challenge to constructions of Nature as distant and separate; Donna Haraway's ideas of 'worlding' and emphasis on human-non-human enmeshment and Chandler and Grove's questioning of the "telos of progress" - provide a context for ILWTL (Morton 2007, Haraway 2016, Chandler and Grove 2017). By employing ephemera from the post war epoch and reflexively redeploing its visual and material vocabularies *ILWTL* sought to interrogate the illusory certainties of the period with regards to human ascendancy and in so doing to query ideas of nature as other and techno-scientific progress that can be described as axiomatic to Modernity.

Methodologically Lee combined images of natural phenomena, topographic features and fashionable interiors, using collage, tracing and video editing, along with performative gestures, to heighten the hyperbolic character of the work's source imagery and generate unexpected intersections of human and nonhuman. This was done with a view to simultaneously foregrounding sublimated eco-anxieties and imagining new forms of geo-human co-mingling.

ILWTL was supported by a funded 9-month studio residency (awarded to selected applicants on the basis of a proposal for a body of research) at the Florence Trust, London. The resulting work was exhibited June 28th – July 13th, 2019.

INTRODUCTION

ILWTL interrogated a selection of mid 20th century visual and material artefacts, through the production of sculptures, videos and drawings, using them as a basis for examining popular post war attitudes towards nature, and investigating the geo-imaginaries that accompanied these. This period was chosen because of the rapid economic growth, expansion in social and geographic mobility, development of futuristic technologies and emergence of popular consumerism by which it was characterised. *ILWTL* repurposed this imagery adopting Anthropocene sensibilities to imagine new forms of geo-human convergence.

While the post war years saw the genesis of the environmental movement such considerations were far from mainstream; as Peter White notes, in view cards of the 1950s nature acts as a scenic backdrop to tropes of personal freedom and prosperity - linked to increased levels of car ownership, that are in turn associated with the coming of age of a capitalist middle class.

ILWTL included the following elements

- Screen (tri-wall card) (approx. dimensions 300cm x 152cm)
- 2 x flat screen TVs (48cm x 27cm)
- 2 looped single screen videos works (duration 9 mins)
- 3 x modified G Plan tables (wax, flints).
- 8 x drawings on carbon paper, stands (wood, plaster, cellulose). (dimensions variable, diameter 38 - 20 cm)

To view short excerpts from video loops see :

<https://vimeo.com/498713345>



Right: Installation detail. *Image credit: Geoff Wilson.*

RESEARCH CHALLENGE

The twin imperatives of deanthropomorphisation and decolonisation can be said to centrally inflect the posthuman turn in scholarship and artistic production. While environmental matters and human / non-human intersections have recently become an important focus within contemporary fine art practice, critical debate around eco-ethical enquiry, postcolonial methodologies and non-representational practices, along with suitable material /formal vocabularies, is still evolving. David Lulka suggests that some eco-imagery, described by Bart Welling as 'ecoporn', evidences an intersection of romanticism and anthropomorphism typified by three key issues: collusion with the possibility of an unsullied ideal; compliance with visual regimes that privilege the all-seeing male subject, and incorporation of imagery of a violent character. Edward Burtynsky's ravishing aerial views of Anthropocene landscapes are frequently cited as exemplifying the problem (Lulka 2016). At the same time despite their avowal of environmental concerns, forms of 'creative' fieldwork, such as Cape Farewell's *The Expeditions series*, raise questions regarding both their ecological footprint and the extent to which they extend rather than depart from expansionist histories of exploration.

ILWTL sought to address these challenges by adopting a form of armchair travel so as to methodically sidestep the problematic proximity of field work and colonialism outlined above. Working in the studio with found material allowed Lee to conceptually accommodate the problems of power and appropriation which attend lens-based enquiry (see Sontag 1977); while the adoption of travel ephemera as her focus supported investigation of the workings of the 20th century touristic gaze and by extension systems of reifying nature which persist within contemporary culture.



Above: Video stills. Image credit: Rona Lee.

CONTEXT

Contemporary scientific and philosophical research (as reflected in the writings Haraway and Morton) suggests that the urgency of climate change not only evidences the impact of human activity on earth systems but reveals the ways in which we are folded into them (Morton 2007, Haraway 2016). Artistic enquiry offers a means to explore these ideas through the imagination and Lee's explorations contribute to post human debate by reworking found topographic imagery in order to both evidence established social constructions of nature and envisage new configurations of the human and non-human.

The use of Rocks as a motif throughout ILWTL builds on the explorations of Surrealist artists such as Eileen Agar and Ithell Colquhoun, where they are deployed as part of their investigation of interstitial subjectivities. More recently contemporary figures such as Ellen Gallagher have utilised the fictional undersea geographies of Drexciya to revise history and, in line with the cultural aesthetic of Afrofuturism, imagine new forms of black temporality. Such fabrications align in turn with wider engagement by artists with science fiction as a visual discourse positioning it as: 'an "imaginary topos" that draws principally on the intersection between landscape and historical/ prehistorical time' (Timberlake 2018). ILWTL extends these activities employing formulations of imaginary geologies in order to postulate forms of transformative environmentalism.



Above top: Installation still. *Image credit: Peter Hope.*

Above: Video still. *Image credit: Rona Lee.*

METHODS AND PROCESSES

Research towards *ILWTL* began in 2017. The immediate starting point was a selection of Photochrome - photo-offset colour saturated - scenic postcards, known to deltiologists as 'Moderns'. The conscious sense of being 'up to date' and lack of concern for the future legacies of emergent consumerism which epitomises such images was utilised by Lee as a basis for addressing environmental relations within the period of late capitalism. Methodologically, her approach might be described retro-futuristic, engaging the imagined futures of the past in order to reflect on the present.

These cards were used as the basis for studio experiments - such as joining them together (without cutting) to create impossible landscapes in which waterfalls cascaded one into another or disparate mountain ranges aligned to form extended horizons. Other explorations involved the digital manipulation of those parts of the scene towards which the gaze of the viewer (figure within the image) is directed to create a vortex.

Subsequently, in order to de-centre the postcard as a material artefact from the work, a series of compositions were made by tracing figures and topographic imagery from a range of books and cards. These incorporated images of dancing, sport, travel, construction activities and design features in order to invoke the generalised optimism of the era recasting them within uncanny landscapes. These tracings were subsequently transferred to carbon paper and displayed in the manner of placards; an approach which, along with the pictographic style of the

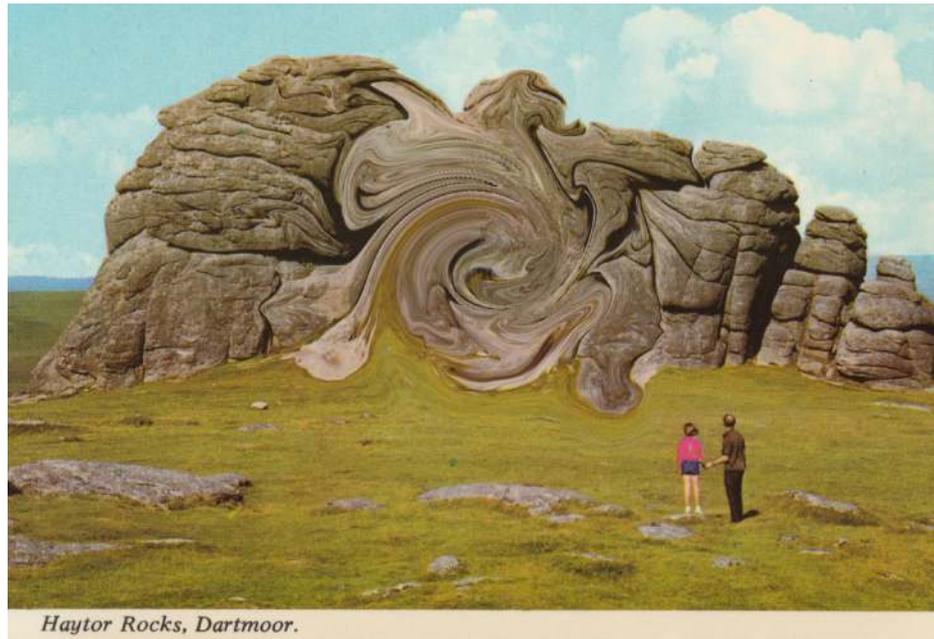
drawings worked to suggest that they might function as 'signs' that the viewer was invited to decode. Video material shot in different thematically connected locations such as a 1970s house was subsequently added and intercut with footage in which Lee performed a series of actions with postcards and stones. Working in this way allowed Lee to deconstruct the visual and material tropes of the era and generate new heterogeneous formulations.



Above: Test drawing. *Image credit: Rona Lee.*



Left: *Endless* 2018 Marble floor tile, postcards, onyx ashtray.
Approx. 60cms x 35cms. *Image credit: Geoff Wilson.*



Adopting a form of armchair travel so as to methodically sidestep the problematic proximity of field work and colonialism.



Top left: Manipulated postcard. *Image credit: Rona Lee.*

Left: Manipulated postcard. *Image credit: Rona Lee.*

DISSEMINATION

ILWTL was exhibited at the Florence Trust, London, between Friday 29 June and Saturday 13 July 2019. The exhibition was visited by around 400 people.

Below: Video still. *Image credit: Rona Lee.*



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Above and back cover: Video still. Image credit: Rona Lee.

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<https://www.artrabbit.com/organisations/the-florence-trust-1>



